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SUBJECT: DUSHANBE HOSTS INAUGURAL SCA REGIONAL REPORTING OFFICERS
CONFERENCE

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¶1. Embassy Dushanbe hosted the first-ever reporting officers conference for Central and South Asia March 10-11 to discuss challenges of reporting in the age of transformational diplomacy and to identify emerging trends in crosscutting issues. Officers from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Russia and Washington participated. This proved especially pertinent for the Central Asian countries, ruled by authoritarian leaders who are wary of "color revolutions," and harbor vested institutional interests opposed to political and, in some cases, economic reform.

WHAT WE CAN DO

¶2. Several deliverables emerged during the conference. Reporting officers agreed to coordinate simultaneous dissemination of reports from each post on key issues possibly including, corruption, energy infrastructure, migration, organized crime, border issues, water rights, agriculture, media, and succession dynamics. Some officers also agreed to coordinate a joint trip and report on the Ferghana valley. Finally, neighboring post officers agreed to visit Afghanistan to meet with Provincial Reconstruction Teams, security permitting, to explore cross-border issues such as trade, demining, and counter narcotics efforts.

PROMOTING TRANSFORMATIONAL DEMOCRACY

¶3. The group wrestled with how to best promote "democracy." Good governance is in its infancy in Central Asia, and ideas such as democracy and freedom of the press are radical indeed. Some suggested that instead of pushing for democracy with a "capital D," and to avoid host governments' fears of another "color revolution," posts could promote programs that advocate democratic values such as accountability, transparency, good

governance, and civic responsibility.

ECONOMIC INVESTMENTS

¶4. Conference participants agreed on the need to examine the question of how to promote U.S. economic interests when faced with much larger foreign investments by governments of regional powers and a less than transparent business and investment climate. Economic growth is moving ahead at a fast pace, with or without the United States. Although governments need legislative, institutional, and regulatory reform for true economic progress, the carrot of foreign direct investment from Russia, Iran, or China without associated pressure for international standard practices, or political or economic strings is too tempting. Russia and China are increasingly using their membership in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Economic Community to influence Central Asia for their own interests, interests which for now are similar.

REGIONAL INTEGRATION

¶5. On regional integration, some Central Asian governments, notably Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are eager to tap into the economic benefits of Afghan regional integration, including hydropower, electricity lines, and increased trade and transportation links. Water sharing issues, agricultural problems (especially in cotton production), and labor migration problems could also be addressed at the regional level. Regional political cooperation remains important to tackle cross-border terrorism, narcotics smuggling, and trafficking in persons. Russia's influence in the region is strong and historical, and Moscow will do whatever it can to maintain stability and retain dominance in energy issues. Some posts frequently face negative press campaigns against the United States that Russia surely had a hand in initiating. As the Central Asian states and their neighbors increasingly interact

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in these areas, post reporting officers can help keep Washington informed on cross-border developments and their policy implications by cooperating on the ground through joint reporting and regular exchange of information.

WE NEED MORE EXCHANGES!

¶6. Officers all agreed recent cuts in public diplomacy budgets throughout the region severely hinder U.S. efforts to promote democracy, human rights, and reform, but identified some areas to focus on to maximize the "bang for the buck." The International Visitors Program (IVP) is one of the best tools to expose local leaders to democratic practices because IVP participants return to their home countries with exposure to Western democratic values that can shape their careers in public service. The payoff for such programs can be measured in decades of their government (or business) careers, in exchange for just a few weeks or months spent in the United States. The same holds true for student exchange programs. The programs do not necessarily have to be in the United States - exposure to Asian democracies could be instructive, and a way to reinforce growing ties to South Asia.

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